Winning Our Own Hearts and Minds: Promotion in Wartime

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The "expert thing" just kills me. I thought I understood something about counterinsurgency, until I started doing it.

—Major John Nagl, near Fallujah, Iraq, 2004[1]

THE UNITED STATES is fighting the Global War on Terrorism with a mindset shaped by the Cold War. That mindset helped create today's joint force that possesses nearly irresistible powers in conventional wars against nation-states. Unfortunately, the wars the United States must fight today in Iraq and Afghanistan are not of this variety.

In some respects, U.S. Armed Forces must overcome the thoroughness with which they have prepared for war against the Soviet Union and the regional threats that succeeded it. The U.S. Armed Forces and the Department of Defense must adapt rapidly to master changing circumstances. Fortunately, they have done this before.

In 1939, with the threat of another world war looming, the U.S. Army began a transformation from being a force of a few hundred thousand men with antiquated weapons and equipment to an organization with over nine million members possessing modern weapons capable of projecting power over vast distances and defeating Nazi Germany's Wehrmacht on its own terms and on its own turf.

While the challenges the Armed Forces face today are different in nature, they are similar in immensity. A flexible system of personnel management that rapidly identified proven leaders and placed them in appropriate positions of responsibility helped accelerate the process of change during World War II. A similar flexibility today could ensure U.S. Armed Forces conduct the wars of the 21st century effectively even before they fully institutionalize the changes necessary to do so.

Major combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have gone amazingly well. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, U.S. Army Central Command waged a brilliant campaign that in less than 6 weeks toppled one of the more formidable armies in the Middle East. The U.S. Army and its joint partners had been practicing for this kind of conventional war for almost 30 years. The practice—and more than a few experiences with conventional combat—took place within a centuries-old tradition of war between nation-states. While heated debate over the direction of future war continues under the heading of Army Transformation, the Army largely knows how to combat the organized armed forces of an enemy state.

Developing doctrine is not enough, doctrine must be assimilated. During the Cold War, the United States has developed and effectively transmitted well-tested doctrine throughout an experienced body of practitioners. Based on that doctrine, we created a military machine that can routinely wage devastatingly effective conventional war. The Army, applying those processes diligently to the Global War on Terrorism, is rapidly adapting to the challenge and has already revised doctrine in Field Manual-I 3-07.22, *Counterinsurgency Operations*.[2] A modular structure better suits the Army's structure for today's wars. On the other hand, as John Nagl's wry comment attests, the Army lacks the collective, practical experience to create an analogous machine for waging war on terrorism and its inevitable concomitant—counterinsurgency. But U.S. Armed Forces lack the understanding, structure, and practice necessary to create a similarly effective machine to fight terrorism. The Armed Forces can ill-afford to await the development of this machine and must, instead, find another way to address the problem.[3]

This is not the first time in recent history the U.S. Army fought a war for which it was unprepared. When World War II began, the U.S. Army had not completely assimilated new developments in combined arms warfare. In spite of assiduous efforts to stay abreast of contemporary developments in warfare, the Army could not decide what to do with the modern technology represented by tanks, airplanes, trucks, and massed, radio-directed artillery. The

Army was not deliberately anachronistic, although some of its members undoubtedly preferred to resist change rather than master it. Rather, while most soldiers were sure developments would profoundly affect the nature of war, they could not say precisely how.

General Douglas MacArthur, Chief of Staff of the Army from 1931 to 1936, later wrote of this period, "It was plain to see that modern war would be a war of massive striking power, a war of lightning movement, a war of many machines, yet a war with its cutting edge in the hands of but a few skilled operatives. . . . It was easy for the professional mind to foresee the armored task force of bombing planes, tanks and supporting motorized columns reviving mobile war."[4]

But while military professionals such as MacArthur were willing to contemplate change and could discern its general outlines, translating change into doctrine was not easy. In *After the Trenches*, William Odom describes how the lessons of World War I became irrelevant because of technological developments such as radio communications, airpower, armor, and large-scale motorization.[5] Odom noted that by 1939, Army doctrine was frankly confused about what to do with new tanks, airplanes, and other less spectacular technological products. More important, the Army lacked practice in combining armor, infantry, and artillery in mobile battles and complex operations.

At World War II's onset, the U.S. Army had only one experimental brigade of "combat cars," (tanks) at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Yet, in spite of deficiencies, within 6 years, the United States had created an Army able to beat the masters of blitzkrieg at their own game.[6] But it took combat to translate that potential into actuality, and in the early years, the Army had to feel its way. While the divisions that assaulted Omaha and Utah Beaches fought with courage, they were not the qualitative equals of their German foes. The 90th Division's experience demonstrates the extent of this gap and how the U.S. Army closed it.

The 90th Division during WWII

When the 90th Division went ashore 2 days after D-Day, it was not ready for ferocious combat in the bocage. General William E. DePuy, then the assistant operations officer of the division's 357th Infantry Regiment, describes one aspect of that lack of preparation: "I wish someone had told us . . . don't attack them where they are strong, but try to . . . go through [a] weak spot. Of course all of this was in the field manuals, but for whatever reason, it wasn't transmitted to us, or perhaps more honestly, it didn't sink in. We learned it the hard way, and from then on, until the end of the war, all of the good commanders fought their battles by looking for a way around the enemy."[7]

Even if the concepts of infiltration and envelopment had sunk in, putting these concepts into practice—conducting reconnaissance patrols; establishing and adhering to control measures; and synchronizing combat support with complex maneuver—might well have exceeded the regiment's competence. In any event, the cost of that ignorance was heavy. In its first few weeks of combat, the 90th Division suffered so many casualties and accomplished so little that General Omar Bradley seriously considered breaking it up. The division's performance cost two of its commanders their jobs.

Division leaders were unprepared for the challenge of combat. DePuy describes the problems: "The commander who took the regiment to Normandy [Philip DeWitt Ginder] was as close to being totally incompetent as it is possible to be. He knew nothing about an infantry regiment. He was erratic to the extreme. Three or four times he ordered the regiment straight ahead into a repeat performance of a failed attack. He will never be forgotten by the survivors. Of the three battalion commanders, one was a graduate of the Military Academy—he was brave but had a personal problem; one was a Reserve officer who had insufficient inner strength to lead troops and face battle; the third one was a despicable punk from the Illinois National Guard—he had given ample evidence of his character continuously during the two years before Normandy. Upon issuing his order for the first attack of the war he went to the aid station, turned himself in and was evacuated."[8] To be sure, these failings had as much to do with character as competence, but new leaders, not new techniques, improved the division's capability.

Eventually, the Army did learn to go around the enemy on a real battlefield. Army leaders and soldiers also learned how to apply capabilities in ways that suited their context. DePuy later reminisced, "I honestly concluded at the end of World War II, when I soberly considered what I had accomplished, that I had moved the forward observers of the artillery across France and Germany."[9]

Given the overwhelming power and unprecedented responsiveness of U.S. artillery and the open, rolling nature of European terrain, it made sense to build tactical plans around the employment of fires. Contemporaneous manuals for the infantry battalion and regiment, however, did not recommend such tactics. The manuals stressed the supremacy of maneuver in achieving victory on the battlefield.[10]

US Army

An infantry squad deployed along a small hedgerow in the bocage.

But they worked. The Army's ability to learn, adapt, and improve in combat was a source of strength for the Allies and amazement to foes. Even German General Erwin Rommel commented on the impressiveness of the U.S. Army's ability to create a huge, competent force out of nothing.

Historian James J. Carafano attributes the success of Operation Cobra, the Normandy breakout, to the newly acquired skill and daring of battalion and regimental commanders.[11] The famous carpet-bombing that paved the way for Cobra paralyzed the Germans operationally but left their forward defenses substantially intact. Using careful maneuver and sheer guts, the battalion and regimental commanders of the First U.S. Army tore a hole in this front with little more than organic assets. In his recent book on the 1944 campaign in Normandy, *Clash of Arms*, Russell Hart says the Army's ability to learn erased the qualitative difference between it and the Wehrmacht.[12]

Rapid Promotions, Summary Relief

The Army made this turnaround not so much by promulgating new methods as by finding new leaders who had proven their aptitude for battle leadership in other positions. Major General William McLain reinvigorated the 90th Division when he came to it from his position as assistant commander of the 45th Division. Before the war, he had been a banker in Oklahoma. George Bittman Barth, whom DePuy credits with turning around the 357th Regiment, was an artilleryman who left a job as the 9th Division chief of staff. DePuy himself left his position as regimental operations officer to command a battalion. Although commissioned in the infantry, he began his career in 1941 as a regimental signal officer and had served the entire war on the regimental staff. There was nothing orthodox or predictable about the career patterns that produced these leaders—no mold or template that could produce or predict who would be able to employ the new technologies most effectively.[13] The Army entrusted them with the awesome responsibility of command without regard to their professional pedigrees.

What was true for the 90th Division was true for the rest of the Army as well. In practice, anyone could command if he showed he could handle the job. Statistics about officers commanding infantry regiments demonstrate the tremendous flexibility of the wartime personnel system. Regimental commanders had between 12 and 26 years of

Artillerymen of the 4th Infantry Division fire their workhorse 105-mm howitzer on the Normandy town of Carentan.

commissioned service. A bare majority was from West Point; the rest had risen from the ranks or were National Guardsmen or Reservists. Most, but not all, had been to the Infantry School in its interwar heyday; not quite half had been to the U.S. Army Command and General Staff School. On average, they lasted about 5 months before they were killed, wounded, promoted, or relieved.[14] What those who survived shared was a demonstrated competence in battle.

Summary relief was frequent and seldom subject to review or oversight. For those who proved their mettle, however, opportunity beckoned. James van Fleet's rise from colonel to corps commander has been well chronicled, but even less well known are the more dramatic ascensions at lower ranks. From 1938 on, Stanley Larsen rose rapidly to eventually command a regiment in the 25th Division in the Pacific. Julian Ewell graduated from West Point in 1939 and was commanding a regiment at Bastogne in December 1944.[15] Promoting and empowering these men is what enabled the Army to erase the qualitative difference between itself and the Wehrmacht.

Accurately identifying those with the potential for command was a problem. Except in special circumstances, selecting commanders based on subjective, noncombat assessments of their character worked only by chance or coincidence. While most were selected for command based on any number of differing criteria, the criteria frequently involved a superior's perception of the person's character. The most frequently cited quality was forcefulness, but other desirable characteristics included physical prowess, endurance, military bearing and neatness, attention to duty, cooperation, initiative, intelligence, judgment and common sense, and leadership.[16]

These assessments were often wrong, formed in haste, or based on mistaken perceptions and, not infrequently, made by officers possessing no particular merit themselves. For instance, Colonel P.D. Ginder apparently so impressed General Jay McKelvie, the 90th Division's commander on D-Day, that McKelvie substituted Ginder for the 357th Infantry Regiment's well-regarded commander, John

Sheehy. The 357th disdained Ginder, but McKelvie believed Ginder was an officer with extraordinary force. The result was that Ginder hurled the 357th forward in self-annihilating attacks.

McKelvie himself was no great shakes as a leader, Lightning Joe Collins summarily relieved him a few days into the Normandy Campaign. In short, commanders were frequently selected on the basis of snap judgments about their character, and those snap judgments were frequently wrong. Only the willingness of commanders to admit their mistakes and try again saved the Army from the consequences of those mistakes.[17]

The system, such as it was, tried to ensure against such faulty judgment by conferring rank only after an officer had proved himself in his position. Other aspects of the system acted to ensure officers selected for command possessed enough training and experience to succeed in the position for which they were selected. For instance, officers were supposed to serve as a captain or major for at least 9 months before being eligible for promotion to the next higher grade; the time in grade stretched to 12 months for promotion to colonel. These guidelines could be waived, however, and frequently were, if a commander thought he had found the right man to promote.[18] In the matter of wartime promotion, the inclination to interpret regulations as guidelines was even more pronounced than usual. The net effect was to ensure candidates for command possessed at least the necessary skill sets to exercise command, even if they were not up to the task.

Not surprisingly, the system was not always right. The system's flexibility came from its willingness to promote, as well as its willingness to relieve an officer of duty, if necessary. Today, relief for cause stigmatizes an officer as unfit for any future position of responsibility and is undertaken only in the direst circumstances. Then, the issue was not the intrinsic worth of the officer in question so much as his ability to master the situation he faced. Clearly, Ginder was the wrong man for the 357th in Normandy. Entering combat for the first time, the 357th needed a steady hand. Excitable, impatient, impulsive, restless, Ginder could not provide the steady, calming leadership the regiment needed in its baptism of fire. During the Battle of the Bulge, however, Ginder took over the 9th Regiment, which, together with the rest of the 2d Infantry Division, held Elsenborn Ridge and the vital north shoulder of the Bulge. Ginder led it through the crisis and the rest of the war. Perhaps Ginder had learned something in the interim. Perhaps his energy and peripatetic leadership style, ill suited to a regiment new to combat, was just the thing to hold a unit together in the chaos of the Bulge.

Ginder's performance illustrates that rehabilitation was possible, and he was not alone. Colonel James V. Luckett commanded the 4th Infantry Division's 12th Regiment successfully after his predecessor's leg was blown off at Normandy, but when he could not make better headway than anyone else in the hell of the Huertgen Forest, he was relieved simply to try to change the situation. Luckett redeemed himself in the Ardennes.

Qualified, experienced leaders were in short supply. Reliefs, woundings, and deaths kept creating vacancies, sometimes faster than new talent could emerge.[19] Commanders could no more afford to assume their infallibility with regard to relief than they could with regard to selection. By way of postscript, Ginder rose to the rank of major general and commanded the 45th Division during the latter stages of the Korean War. Ginder's example reveals the limitations of assessment; unfit for one emergency, he was well suited to another.

Lessons Learned

The dramatically different contexts of World War II and the Global War on Terrorism make any attempt to transfer lessons from one to the other problematic. The massive expansion of World War II led to a rapid infusion of fresh blood just when the Army needed to assimilate new ideas. Yet, for all of the challenge of new technologies, the Army faced the familiar problem of war between nation-states, not wars against nonstate actors and insurgents.

Even so, the World War II system was not without its drawbacks. While successful leaders grasped the essentials of maneuver and leadership under fire, their sophistication did not always equal their vigor. Captains with 4 or 5 years experience commanded battalions. Such young men might instinctively understand and conduct combined arms warfare, but teaching others, such as their staffs, how to do so might exceed their capacity, which could result in inadequate control measures or the failure to integrate all useful weapons systems. In any given battalion operation, such deficiencies might not make much difference in the battle's outcome, but they would surely increase the butcher's bill.

Nevertheless, the experience of World War II shows that rapidly changing a military organization during wartime requires changing its leaders. In *Winning the Next War,* Harvard professor Stephen Peter Rosen argues that promotion is a central instrument for instituting change in large institutions; the

more rapidly change is desired, the more directly senior leaders must be able to affect promotion.[20] The Army's rapid improvement in Normandy adds weight to Rosen's conclusions, but improvement came at the cost of a massive leadership turnover that was anathema to the bureaucratic routines of peacetime personnel managers.

About the only reliable basis on which to promote, or to relieve, a commander is actual performance in an analogous situation, whether in combat or in conducting the more complex blend of politics and violence required in counterinsurgency operations. While character definitely counts, no one knows for sure which part of it counts or whether leaders in question actually have the character they are thought to have. McKelvie thought Grinder would be a great regimental commander for the invasion of Normandy, while Ginder's erstwhile subordinates thought him unfit for any command whatsoever. Both were mistaken. Associate Research Professor of Military Strategy Leonard Wong recently pointed out that a number of talented, adaptive leaders are emerging from the crucible of Iraq.[21] We need to give those leaders the responsibility and the rank to implement necessary changes.

Any successful wartime personnel management system must regard its decisions with some humility. While those handpicked for command might turn out to be utterly unsuited for it, it is more likely they are simply unsuited for the particular situation in which they find themselves. On the other hand, individuals who confound every usual paradigm of successful leadership traits might be uniquely effective in a given situation. The institution and those comprising it must be equally willing to make, admit, and promptly rectify mistakes. Far more important, commanders must be able to seize the moment and place the right person in the right position at the right time. If, as experience seems to indicate, the Army must change to cope with the dangerous strategic and operational contexts of the Global War on Terrorism, it could do worse than to learn from its past. ***MR***

NOTES

1. Peter Maas, "Professor Nagl's War," *New York Times Magazine*, 11 January 2004.
2. U.S. Army Field Manual-I 3-07.22, *Counterinsurgency Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 2004).
3. For those wishing to review the evolution of Army Doctrine, see John Romjue, *From Active Defense to AirLand Battle: The Development of Army Doctrine, 1973-1982* (Fort Monroe, VA: Historical Office, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command [TRADOC], June 1984), and *American Army Doctrine for the Post-Cold War* (Fort Monroe, VA: Military History Office, TRADOC, 1996). The former makes clear that the fundamental problem Army doctrine was designed to address from 1973 to 1986 was confronting the Soviets on the plains of Europe. On that basis, the Army derived its tactical doctrine and mission training plans on which units were evaluated at the combat training centers and the design of those training centers themselves. On the last point, see Anne W. Chapman, *The Origins and Development of the National Training Center 1976-1984* (Fort Monroe, VA: Office of the Command Historian, TRADOC, 1992).

   Romjue's monograph on the development of post-Cold War doctrine discusses its modification to deal with a greater variety of less dire threats. Nowhere in this process of doctrinal evolution did anyone address the problem of counterinsurgency, a problem the Army successfully avoided confronting during the Vietnam War, as Andrew F. Krepinevich demonstrates in *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). Special operations forces' heavy participation in both campaigns should not obscure the fact that these missions were largely conventional. The United States did not create the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan nor cause hostilities between the Alliance and the Taliban; it supported the Alliance through airpower and other forms of combat support. In short, Special Forces waged conventional war in an unconventional manner.
4. GEN Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York: Da Capo, 1964), 91; William O. Odom, *After the Trenches: The Transformation of U.S. Army Doctrine, 1918-1939* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 236-45.
5. In fairness, no one else, not even the Germans, had figured out how to employ the new tanks, airplanes, and other technological products. While General Heinz Guderian massed his tanks in the hundreds for the 1940 sichelschnitt to the Ardennes, General Erwin Rommel successfully distributed them in "penny packets" in his portion of the thrust. All parties to the conflict subscribed to the doctrine that tanks were for penetrating to the enemy's rear, while antitank defense was for antitank guns. The U.S. Army embodied this concept in its tank-destroyer units, a concept that came to grief against a competent opponent.
6. GEN William E. DePuy, LTC Romie L. Brownlee, and LTC William J. Mullen III, *Changing an Army: An Oral History of General William E. DePuy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army Military History Institute, 1986), 26.
7. DePuy and others, 16, 31.
8. DePuy and others, 86. DePuy does not identify the commander. See also John Colby and Melissa Roberts, *War from the Ground Up: The 90th Division in World War II* (Austin, TX: Nortex Press, 1991), 485.
9. Ibid.
10. See U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 7-20, *Infantry Battalion* (Washington, DC: 1944) and *Infantry Regiment* (Washington, DC: 1944).
11. James J. Carafano, *After D-day: Operation Cobra and the Normandy Breakout* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).
12. Russell A. Hart, *Clash of Arms: How the Allies Won in Normandy* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 8-10.
13. DePuy and others, 5-6, 32-36.
14. These figures on Army personnel changes during World War II are derived from a database on regimental command, which I created. I found the names of commanders and computed the lengths of their commands based on the dates given in *Order of Battle of the U.S. Army World War II: European Theatre of Operations: Divisions* (Office of the Theater Historian, Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces), on-line at <www.army.mil/cmh-pg/documents/eto-ob/71ID-ETO.htm>, accessed 17 April 2002. Many of these dates reflect the time a division arrived in theater, rather than the actual time an officer assumed command. Nonetheless, they accurately reflect the actual tenure of regimental command in battle. I compiled the other details using contemporaneous editions of *The Army Register.*
15. I derived the information on Julian Ewell's career from the database described in note 14. Although Ewell's Vietnam-era reputation is less than stellar, he excelled as a regimental officer during World War II, especially during the siege at Bastogne. See Hugh M. Cole, *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1965), 445-51. See also LTC Robert S. Holmes, *Oral History of Stanley R. Larsen* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army Military History Institute, 1977), sec III, 4.
16. U.S. Department of War, Adjutant General's Office, Form 67, 1 July 1926, reprinted in *The Officers' Guide,* 6th ed., *A Ready Reference on Customs and Correct Procedures Which Pertain to Commissioned Officers of the Army of the United States* (Harrisburg, PA: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1941), 320-1.
17. See COL Dan Bolger, "Zero Defects: Command Climate in the First U.S. Army, 1944-1945," *Military Review* (May 1991): 61-73. Bolger argues that the frequency of relief had the opposite effect, creating a climate of insecurity for officers in the 1st U.S. Army. He, however, focused on senior leaders at division and above. Many cases he cites, including Jay MacKelvie and his successor, Gene Landrum, were roundly and universally condemned by subordinates at all levels. Bolger neglects the other side of the coin—professional disaster for some provided opportunity for others.
18. For the alterations in promotion policy, see War Department, Army Regulation (AR) 605-12, *Commissioned Officers: Temporary Promotion in the Army of the United States* (Washington, DC: GPO, 3 February 1944), 3, and War Department, Change 1, AR 605-12, *Commissioned Officers: Temporary Promotion in the Army of the United States* (Washington, DC: GPO, 3 February 1944), 1. For World War II promotion timelines, see Samuel A. Stouffer, Edward A. Suchman, Leland C. DeVinney, Shirley A. Star, and Robin M. Williams, Jr., *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life*, I (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949), 271. For the alteration of the "block" policy, see MG M.G. White, Assistant Chief of Staff for Personnel, Memorandum for General Marshall, dated 29 July 1944, Subject: Promotion Policy, 1 (National Archives, Record Group 165, Box 378). The memorandum does not conclusively state the system of promotion by blocks was to be discontinued. George Marshall stamped it "Approved." His approval usually made recommendations policy.
19. Cole, 103-35; West Point Alumni Foundation, Inc., *Register of Graduates and Former Cadets: United States Military Academy* (West Point, NY: 1960), 345. Ginder's entry in the register, which he presumably composed, does not mention his service with the 90th Division.
20. Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 20-21.
21. Leonard Wong, *Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2004).

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